

Scythe Singh-Sousa

HIST-111

12/4/24

# John Brown: America's first Domestic Terrorist and Freedom Fighter

John Brown was both an American freedom fighter while simultaneously being America's first Domestic Terrorist. This duality is present even within the immediate aftermath of his raid on Harpers Ferry, in which Fredrick Douglass claimed that without John Brown and other past slave revolts then humanity would stay in perpetual idiocy claiming "The insurrection at Charleston, South Carolina in 1832 the lead of Denmark Vesey; that of South Hampton, Va., under the lead of Nathaniel Turner, and the insurrection at Harper's Farry, were all but the workings of that divine principle of the human soul, which wages eternal warfare against slavery, and without which men would be simply like 'Dumb, driven cattle.'" (Douglass, 1860). Because Brown's actions were in service of the abolition of slavery, calling him a terrorist in the modern-day definition is unfair but, contextually appropriate. This discrepancy is also why it's fair to call John Brown America's first freedom fighter John Brown's actions despite being done to explicitly cause terror within the slaveholders in Virginia his actions to liberate and free indentured slaves make his cause and actions righteous tantamount to a freedom fighter, one that

fighters for the liberation of the oppressed and seeks to rectify and abolish material and social harms.

There is a long history of various progressive social movements before abolitionism in the United States. For instance, the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, more commonly known as Shakers, is a religious movement that has historically advocated for racial equity, gender equality, egalitarianism, pacifism, and celibacy since its inception in the 18th-century<sup>1</sup>. Even more violent movements with pacifist tendencies such as Anarchism and Marxism had a similar streak toward using violence and various methods of action to push for racial and social equality. Even before the concept of the United States was founded the Quakers were notorious for protesting American shipments due to the early colonies' participation in the slave trade<sup>2</sup>. For instance, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society was one of the first abolitionist organizations to have Benjamin Franklin<sup>3</sup> give a public address titled in he said "Slavery is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils." (Franklin, 1790). What I hope to do by giving a brief outline of various progressive social movements within the United States is that John Brown's actions are first and foremost a continuation of the radical tradition certain Christian sects held in regard to abolishing slavery. Take for instance that Brown's radicalization towards the abolitionist position was that he witnessed a slave being beaten with an iron shovel and that this had fundamentally altered his view on slavery, this story is corroborated by various members of his surviving family following the aftermath of the American Civil War<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.shakermuseum.us/collection/shakers-community-opens-july-17/inclusion>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/quaker-activism/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.14701000/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-inter-ocean-the-brown-family-in-pasa/76818707/>

understanding that his actions are caused by not only the belief in that slavery ought to be abolished but, that he personally witnessed slaves being beaten. Alongside this, various actions that Brown had taken prior to the event do fit in line with what is oftentimes considered to be “American Heroism” or “Patriotism”, as an example from John Brown himself during the raid on Harper’s Ferry that led to his death historian Paul Finkleman writes that the following action took place during the raid, “During his raid, Brown and his men had captured a number of slave owners in the area, including Lewis Washington, the great-grand-nephew of President George Washington. Brown did not kill any of these captured men, and he went out of his way to protect them and make sure they were not harmed.” (Lewis, 2011). Brown’s actions of attempting to both free the enslaved and to also at some point defend the enslaver without solely executing them shows that Brown had in some regards remorse and compassion in spite of the radical action that he had taken to abolish what he saw as an unjustifiable institution. Taking into consideration these factors that led up to Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry I believe it is fair to say that John Brown was America’s first domestic terrorist for causing enough fear to have slaveholders retaliate for his raid and have him executed to be made an example out of, but, he is by that same coin a genuine freedom fighter for attempting to take direct steps to end the institution of slavery within the United States even if it cost him his own life.

To add some more fuel to the fire, we can see how Brown’s actions at Harper’s Ferry had assisted in galvanizing the abolitionist movement with the reaction to his execution doing the following as presented by *The American Yawp* an open-source history textbook writes “Brown prophesied while in prison that the nation’s crimes would only be purged with blood. He went to the gallows in December 1859. Northerners made a stunning display of sympathy on the day of

his execution. Southerners took their reactions to mean that the coming 1860 election would be, in many ways, a referendum on secession and disunion.” (Locke & Wright). This in addition to his aforementioned past with the Election of 1860 just right around the corner polarizing attitudes and talks of radical action beyond of what John Brown could’ve ever dreamed of came underway with the Southern States which made the Confederate States of America organizing around succeeding from the Union and the martyrdom of John Brown within various abolitionist circles had caused according to the American Yawp “The Republican platform made the party’s antislavery commitments clear, also making wide promises to its white constituents, particularly westerners, with the promise of new land, transcontinental railroads, and broad support of public schools.” (Locke & Wright). Alongside John Brown’s previous actions during his raid on Harper’s Ferry and his participation in orchestrating and executing the Pottawatomie massacre in 1856 had solidified him as a righteous hero this is best displayed with the infamous marching song preformed during the American Civil War “John Brown’s Body” being sung as soon as the first month into the war<sup>5</sup> and becoming such a well established song that it has been sung beyond the conclusion of the war and is infamously tied to both Civil Rights and Labor Rights movements within the United States thanks to Pete Seeger’s 1959 recording of the song.

Because of all of this I believe that it is important to say that John Brown is both America’s first Domestic Terrorist for striking fear into the hearts of slaveholders at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, enough fear to hang him and originally deem him a traitor to the nation alongside being the first true American freedom fighter for his exhuming as a righteous political figure and revolutionary in the aftermath of his hanging, his galvanization of the American Abolitionist movement, and his name being etched into the very essence of the American mind as a positive force for

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-john-brown-song-john-brown-s-body.htm>

progress thanks to his name and likeness being used as a rallying cry and marching song for the soldiers all throughout the Union to free slaves and rid the Confederate States of America from their traitorous ways and insistence on upholding the political and socio-economic system of slavery.